

Woman, a Power Equal to Man

Translation of woman as a “fit helpmate” for man is questioned

By R. David Freedman

In the second account of creation recited in Genesis* woman is created not at the same time as man, but only after God has already created man, placed him in the Garden of Eden and commanded him not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God then concludes that it is not good for man to be alone and decides to make a “helper” or “helpmate” “suitable” for man. At least that is the customary translation.

The verse in this story on which I would like to focus is Genesis 2:18b. The variations in translation are for the most part slight. The woman is to be an assistant, fit or appropriate for the man. Here are a few translations of the verse; in each God is speaking:

“I shall make him a helper fit for him.” (*Revised Standard Version*)

“I will make him a helpmate.” (*Jerusalem Bible*)

“I will make a fitting helper for him.” (*New Jewish Publication Society*)

“I will make him an aid fit for him.” (*Anchor Bible—Genesis*)

The two Hebrew words that describe the position of the to-be-created woman vis-a-vis the man are *‘ezer k^enegdô*.

I believe the customary translation of these two words, despite its near universal adoption, is wrong. That is not what the words are intended to convey. They should be translated instead to mean approximately “a power equal to man.”† That is, when God concluded that he would create another creature so that man would not be alone, he decided to make “a power equal to him,” someone whose strength was equal to man’s. Woman was not intended to be merely man’s helper. She was to be instead his partner.

A careful study of the two Hebrew words involved will demonstrate this.

The Hebrew word *‘ezer* is a combination of two roots, one *‘-z-r* meaning “to rescue,” “to save,” and the other *ġ-z-* meaning “to be strong.” The difference is in the first sign. The raised *‘* stands for the letter *‘ayin*. Today in Hebrew the letter is often silent. In ancient times it was a guttural sound in the back of the throat. The symbol *ġ* stands for the letter *ghayyin*, a guttural much like ancient Hebrew *‘ayin*, but pronounced higher up in the throat. Some ancient Semitic languages distinguished between the two signs; others did not. For example, Ugaritic maintains a distinction between *‘ayin* and *ghayyin*. Hebrew no longer does.*

In Phoenicia in about 1500 B.C.E. these two different phonemes, or sounds, began to be written in the same way; that is, they were represented by the same sign. As the scholars would say, the two phonemes merged into one grapheme. Later the pronunciation also merged. In Hebrew the merger appears to have taken place somewhat later, around 1200 B.C.E. Thus, when the Bible was written, what originally had been two roots of *‘ezer*, one with an *‘ayin* and one with a *ghayyin*, had merged into one.

With the merger of the writing and pronunciation came the merger of meaning. The word *‘ezer* could mean either “to save” (*‘-z-r*) or “to be strong” (*ġ-z-r*).† But in time the root *‘-z-r* was always interpreted as “to help,” a mixture of both nuances.

The noun *‘ezer* occurs 21 times in the Hebrew Bible. In eight instances, the word means “savior.” These instances are easy to identify because they are used with other expressions of saving or with associated ideas. For example, in Psalm 70:5 we read:

I am completely destitute;
O God, hurry to my rescue (*‘ezri*).

You are my deliverer (*m^efall^eti*).
O Lord do not delay.

The context and especially the word *m^efall^eti* (“deliverer”) make the meaning *‘ezeri* (“my aid” or “my help”) clear. The other seven examples are similar.†

In other Biblical usages, the root *‘ezer* means “strength.” For example, in Deuteronomy 33:26, we find this passage:

There is none like God, O Jeshurun,
The Rider of the Sky in your strength (*be ‘ezreka*),
in the heavens in your majesty (*ga’avah*).

And in Deuteronomy 33:29:

Happy are you, Israel! Who is like you,
a people delivered by the Lord,
The shield of your strength (*‘ezreka*)
and the sword of your majesty (*ga’avah*).

The conclusion of verse 29 tells of the defeat of Israel’s enemies—a clear indication that *‘ezer* in these examples means “strength.” Second, in several instances in the Bible, the concept of majesty is paralleled with the concept of strength. In these other examples the word for strength is clear. Thus, in Psalm 68:34 we find a clear parallel between majesty and strength.

Ascribe strength (*‘oz*) to God:
His majesty (*ga’avah*) is upon Israel,
and his strength (*‘uzzo*) is in the heavens.

Similarly in Psalm 93:1

The Lord reigns,
He is clothed in majesty (*ge’ut*, a variant of *ga’avah*)
He is girded with strength (*‘oz*).

Since strength is the parallel to majesty in these cases (where *‘oz* is used to mean strength), we should also expect strength to be the parallel to majesty in Deuteronomy 33:29 where a form of *‘ezer* is used (*‘ezreka* meaning “your strength”) instead of *‘oz*.

Furthermore, the phrase in Deuteronomy 33:29, “The shield of your strength,” must be compared to the phrase in Psalm 28:7, “The Lord is my strength (*‘uzzi*) and my shield.” The juxtaposition of shield and strength (*‘oz*) suggests that the word (*‘ezreka*) juxtaposed with shield in Deuteronomy 33:29 means “my strength” rather than “my aid or savior.”

Finally, the fact that one king of Judah had two names, *‘zryh* and *‘zyh* (Azariah and Uzziah, both referring to God’s strength) makes it clear that a root *‘-z-r* meaning “strength” was known in Hebrew.

Other instances in which the forms of *‘ezer* mean “strength” could be multiplied and the meaning demonstrated in the same way.†

Thus, forms of *‘ezer* as used in the Bible can mean “to save” or “to be strong.” In Genesis 2:18b, when God speaks of the being He is to create to relieve the man’s loneliness, He is surely not creating this creature to be the man’s savior. This makes no sense. God creates this new creature to be, like the man, a power (or strength) superior to the animals. This is the true meaning of *‘ezer* as used in this passage.

The second word from Genesis 2:18b we must examine is *k^enegdô*. This word appears in the Bible only once. (Scholars call such a word a *hapax legomenon* or *hapax* for short.) In later Mishnaic Hebrew, the root *k^eneged* means “equal,” as in the famous saying that “The study of Torah is equal (*k^eneged*) to all the other

commandments.”

In my view there is no basis for translating *k^eneged* as “fit” or “appropriate,” as the traditional translators do when they describe the woman as a “fit helper.”

When God creates Eve from Adam’s rib, His intent is that she will be—unlike the animals—“a power (or strength) equal to him.” I think that there is no other way of understanding the phrase *‘ezer kenegdo* that can be defended philologically. The traditional translation is based on a late nuance of *‘ezer* (help) which is not justified by the context.

Note that my translation accords with the account of creation in Genesis 1 where man and woman are created at the same time. In Chapter 1 man and woman are created “in the image of God.” In my interpretations *‘ezer kenegdo* fills the literary function of two phrases in Genesis 1—“in the image of God” and “male and female He created them.” Eve is in Adam’s image to the degree that she is his equal—just as man is created in God’s image in that he fulfills an analogous role. Moreover, “male and female He created them” does not lead us to conclude the superiority of either.

Reflections of this essential equality are found elsewhere in the Bible. Even in the Covenant Code (Exodus 21 and 22), which is so patently early that even some modern scholars have attributed it to Moses, men and women are consistently liable to the same punishment for the same crime (equal pay for equal work); and crimes committed against a man or a woman are punished identically. Clearly, the concept in Genesis 2 of Eve’s having been created to be Adam’s equal underlies the legal provisions of the Covenant Code.

But the equality of punishment shows up already in Genesis 3, in the punishments of Adam and Eve for having disobeyed God and for having eaten from the forbidden fruit. The equality of their punishments can be seen from the following chart:

	Role	New Attitude	Partner	Punishment
Adam	Farmer	Toil	Earth	willful production of thorns and thistles instead of grain (frustration)
Eve	Child-bearing	Pain	Adam	Adam’s willful dominance over Eve despite her desire for him (frustration)

Moreover, in both instances the temporary nature of the punishment is evident in the Bible. The curse imposed on the earth in punishment of Adam’s sin is removed at the birth of Noah:

This one [Noah] will bring us relief for the earth cursed by the Lord (Genesis 5:29).

The woman’s punishment was likewise temporary. In Genesis 30:14–16 Leah and Rachel determine Jacob’s sleeping arrangements for the night in his absence. Clearly, the text takes for granted that the Patriarch had no “mastery” over his wives in this regard. What is more, Exodus 21:10 guarantees a first wife food, clothing, and conjugal rights in the event that her husband takes a second wife. This ancient interpretation of the verse is proof that man’s sexual mastery over woman was temporary.

Still more evidence for the equality of Adam and Eve comes from Genesis 2:23, where Adam says of Eve:

This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.

The Bible is making use of both meanings of this double entendre.[†] Eve was literally created from Adam’s bone and flesh. But the idiomatic meaning in the Bible of “bone and flesh” is “very close relative,” “one of us”—in effect, “our equal.” For example, when Laban refers to Jacob as “my bone and my flesh” in Genesis 29:14, he provides Jacob with free hospitality. But in verse 15, where Jacob is demoted to ah (brother, kinsman), he has to work for his keep.[†] Adam reinforces the double meaning of the phrase “bone and flesh” in Genesis 2:23, where he says:

She shall be called “woman” (*iššah*) because she was taken out of “man” (*iš*).

The idiomatic meaning of “bone and flesh” as “equal” retains its force, however, alongside the literal meaning.

So it is that God made up for the inadequacy of His original creation of man—an inadequacy that He admits to by saying “It is not good for the man to be alone”—by creating the female of the species, who is intended to be *‘ezer k^enegdô*, “a power equal to him.”†

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